

Death of a Co-Worker or Their Loved One

A sudden death or terminal illness can be a shock and deep loss to any of us, both in our personal lives, and in the workplace. When a co-worker, or one of their family members, dies suddenly or becomes terminally ill, our productivity and the dynamics of our work place are greatly affected. We probably have spent many hours with that person, and consider him/her not just a co-worker, but also a friend. With the death of a co-worker, often we do not think of them ever leaving unless it is to retire or take another position. Death of a co-worker can touch peoples' feelings about their work and workplace, their own lives, and their own fears about death and dying. People who work together can become like extended family, and when they suffer a loss, friends and co-workers grieve. When the death is unexpected, as from violence, accident, suicide or sudden terminal illness, it can be even more traumatic to the co-workers who did not have a chance to say good-bye.

The following are some suggestions that may help you through this difficult time:

The Grieving Process - Feelings and symptoms of grief can take weeks, months, and even years to individually process. We do not follow or heal according to a timetable, but over time our emotions do ease. The brief time given to attend the wake and funeral only touches on the beginning stages of grief. The feelings and symptoms can be different for each of us. They may include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep disorders, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness, and problems with concentration. Some outcomes of grief may include: 1) finding a new balance (which doesn't necessarily mean that things will ever be the same), and 2) growth (which means readiness to move ahead with one's life). Most of the time we feel several of these emotions at the same time, but in varying degrees. Eventually each phase is completed and we move ahead. The extent, depth and duration will depend on how close we were to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, and our own situation and losses that we have experienced.

If the death is of a co-worker's loved one:

- Take the time to offer your condolences and caring support to your co-worker and their family
- Allow yourself time to grieve for your co-worker's loss and also for the losses you have faced
- It may be difficult, but let your co-worker know that you are thinking about them while still allowing them their quiet moments
- Attend the visitation, funeral or memorial service if possible.

Some things you might do if it is the co-worker who has died:

- **Attend the funeral or memorial service** - This gives you a chance to say good-bye and offer condolences to the family.

- **Conduct a work-place only event** - A luncheon or office memorial is a chance for co-workers to acknowledge their unique relationship with the deceased.
- **Create a memorial** - A photo, card, or special item the person kept on his/her desk might be a way to remember. Or you might consider putting up a plaque or picture of the deceased in an area as a remembrance. Depending on space and the situation, planting a tree at the work-site can also be done.
- **Hold or participate in some type of collection-** This can be done for a special cause or for the family/children of the deceased, if appropriate.
- **Create a book of memories** - This can be given to the family as a way to let them know of their loved one's work life. These can become unique memories for the family, and a way for you to privately express feelings and memories. It is also a helpful way of letting them know their loved one was a valued employee and is missed.

What to expect:

- **People experience grief differently** - You or your co-worker who was particularly close to the person who died, may feel depressed, absent-minded, short-tempered, or exhausted. These are all normal feelings.
- **Creating healthy memories is part of healing** - Some people find talking about the deceased helps them manage their grief. Others keep to themselves. Respect the fact that others may feel the loss more or less strongly than you, or tend to cope differently.
- **A death generates questions and fears about our own mortality** - If a co-worker dies, we may feel guilty or angry at that person, at life, or at the medical profession. It may cause you to question your own life and how temporary life is with those we love. These are all normal reactions and emotions.
- **Be aware of how you may react to a deceased co-worker's replacement or even clearing their work area** - Your anger and disappointment at his/her performance, personality or work style, may be less about the individual than your grief about the person they are replacing. Clearing the work area is a policy matter that management must adhere to and not about trying to erase the person's memory too quickly.
- **Seek help** - Be aware that there may be times when talking to a trained professional might be helpful, especially if you are having ongoing difficulty dealing with the loss or if your work performance is suffering. This can be a signal that this loss or others are affecting you more profoundly than you thought. The members of the Traumatic Incident Stress Management Team are available. They and other counselors can be reached at the **Employee Service Program** in the Lansing or Detroit offices. These services are available to you or your loved one. If any ongoing counseling is needed, they will assist in referring you to a professional in your area who specializes in grief and loss. Employee Service Program professional counselors are available for confidential assistance to state employees and their families, free of charge, and can be contacted at 517-373-7630 or 1-800-521-1377, Monday through Friday 8:00am – 5:00pm. For more information, visit the ESP web page at www.michigan.gov/esp.